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Timofeeva, Olga

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Janie Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity: The Adaptation of Latin Rhetoric in Old English Poetry*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 237 + xii pp. ISBN 978-0-8020-9157-4

This book is a timely, thorough and learned re-evaluation of the role of classical rhetoric in Old English poetry and of the extent of classical learning in Anglo-Saxon literary tradition more generally. Although “the bond between Old English literature and Latin learning” (p. 5) is undeniable, many scholars seem to take it for granted that the use of particular figures and tropes by Anglo-Saxon vernacular poets is indicative of their rhetorical schooling and familiarity with classical nomenclatures. As Janie Steen shows (in chapter 1, *Knowledge of Rhetoric in Anglo-Saxon England*), this assumption is in conflict with historical evidence. In terms of chronology, there were three focal periods when the study and practise of rhetoric flourished in early medieval Britain: the first one is represented by the Romano-British authors from before the Anglo-Saxon-settlement age, the second one by the late-seventh- to mid-eighth-century alumni of Canterbury and York, and the third one is connected with the Benedictine reform of the late tenth century. Thus Old English poetry, which was written either later or earlier than the respective heydays, that is between the mid-eighth and mid-tenth century, cannot support the claim that Latin rhetorical figures were employed by poets formally trained in them. Not only do we lack manuscript evidence for the seminal rhetorical works of Cicero, the elder Seneca, Quintilian, and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, but we also see that ideologically rhetoric was deemed and sometimes condemned in the Christian context as oversophisticated and pagan. Is it then possible to explain the “presence of ‘Latin rhetorical patterns’ in Old English verse” (p. 15) in some other way?

Steen suggests that, even though rhetorical theory was probably unknown for most of the Anglo-Saxon period, in practise its devices could have been introduced into vernacular poetry through the medium of rhetorically trained Christian Latin poets of late Antiquity such as Juvenius, Caelius Sedulius, and Arator, whose verse was widely read, quoted and recycled at the time. But in order to be able to say that a particular device was indeed introduced from Latin rhetoric into vernacular poetry, we have to establish what rhetorical patterns characterised the two traditions, whether there was any overlap between them, or predominance or underuse of some poetic devices. This is done in chapter 2, *The Patterns of Latin and Vernacular Verse*, which on the one hand examines the dissemination of Latin rhetoric to Anglo-Latin poetry, and on the other hand compares this poetic tradition to Old English verse. The two insular poeses are exemplified by Bede’s metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti* and Old English *Andreas*. Steen shows that several rhetorical devices are shared by both texts, e.g., metaphor, alliteration, paronomasia, puns, and to some extent assonance and rhyme. Many more, however, are characteristic (that is they are employed more frequently) only of one of the two verse traditions, e.g., hyperbaton, zeugma, ecphrasis, etc. of the Latin, and echoic repetition, compounds, kennings, doublets, etc. of the Old English one. The chapter further emphasises the influence of Sedulius, Arator, and Juvenius on both the structure and rhetoric of Bede’s poem, and the rhetorical parallels between *Andreas* and *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*. The four chapters that follow are case studies of selected Old English poems, in which the influence of Latin rhetoric on the vernacular verse is assessed in more detail.

The first among them is *The Phoenix* examined in chapter 3. Because this poem is a rendering of the *Carmen de aue phoenix* by Lactantius, its rhetorical figures can be traced directly to their Latin source. Steen characterises the original as

a subtle allegory of the death and resurrection of Christ, in which “[r]hetorical devices are ... employed as a kind of code, opening up another level of allusion” (pp. 37–38), aimed at eloquent persuasion of a cultivated Mediterranean reader. The *Phoenix*-poet, however, seeks “to inspire a Christian audience educated in Anglo-Saxon monasteries and cathedral schools” (p. 39) and therefore has to elucidate the allegory and “to assimilate the classical source into his native idiom” (p. 43), by expanding and explaining the allusions and by ornamenting his text with alliteration, repetition, and compounds. At the same time, as Steen claims, he adopts several Latinate patterns from *Carmen de aue phoenice*, e.g., anaphora, simile, and homoeoteleuton. I illustrate her argument with the rhetorical figure of anaphora, “[t]he repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or lines.”¹ Lactantius opens his poem with a depiction of an idealised beautiful garden where earthly ills are not present:

Qua patet aeterni maxima porta poli
Nec tamen aestiuos hiemisue propinquus ad ortus
Sed qua sol uerno fundit ab axe diem.
 Illic planities tractus diffundit apertos,
Nec tumulus crescit **nec** caua uallis hiat (ll. 2–6)
 [...]
 Non huc exsanguis morbi **non** aegra senectus
Nec mors crudelis **nec** metus asper adest
Nec scelus infandum **nec** opum uesana cupidio
 Cernitur aut ardens caedis amore furor (ll. 15–18)

‘... where the great door of the everlasting heavens lies open. Far from the summer or winter sunrises, it is close to where the sun pours out the day from skies of spring. A plain spreads its open fields there: no mound swells up, no hollow valley yawns. [...] Wan diseases do not come here, nor feeble old age, nor cruel death, nor desperate fear, nor unspeakable crime, nor the mad desire for wealth, nor frenzy burning with love of slaughter.’ (pp. 43, 45)²

Similar anaphoric negatives describe the heavenly place in the Old English version:

Ðær bið oft open [...] heofonrices duru.
 [...] **Ne** mæg þær ren **ne** snaw,
ne forstes fnæst **ne** fyres blæst,
ne hægles hryre **ne** hrimes dryre
ne sunnan hætu, **ne** sincaldu (ll. 11–17)
 [...]
 Nis þær on þam londe laðgeniðla
ne wop **ne** wracu, weatacen **nan**,
 yldu **ne** yrmðu **ne** se enga deað (ll. 50–52)

¹ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger et al., Princeton: Princeton University Press, s.v. *anaphora*.

² Quotations, emphasis, and translations are all from Steen.

‘Three the door of the heavenly kingdom is often open [...] There may neither rain, nor snow, nor breath of frost, nor blast of fire, nor pouring of hail, nor falling of hoarfrost, nor the heat of the sun, nor endless cold [...] In that land there is no persecutor, neither weeping nor vengeance, no sign of woe, neither old age, nor misery, nor cruel death’

As Steen remarks, “[t]hese negative statements, yoked by anaphora ... articulate the inexpressibility topos” (p. 43), both poems thus contributing to the long-established tradition of portrayal of the Golden Age or places of perfection (ibid.). On the one hand the use of anaphora by the *Phoenix*-poet is clearly triggered by the Latin original, yet on the other his anaphora is extended to include more local concerns: harsh weather and bitter cold. Steen suggests that his confident use anaphora can most convincingly be explained by “his learnedness” (p. 48) and goes on to enumerate several other idealised gardens that could have been known to the *Phoenix*-poet: those in the *Laudes Dei* by Dracontius, the *Carmen de spiritalis historiae gestis* by Avitus, vernacular homilies, and so on (pp. 48–53). Undoubtedly the connection between the ideal-place topos and negative anaphora that makes it so much unlike any place we know on earth is well rooted in the classical, continental Christian and Anglo-Latin tradition. I would say, however, that Steen’s claim that anaphora as such is a Latinate device (p. 68) goes a bit too far in the direction of “many scholars” criticised by her in the introduction, while the confidence in the use of anaphora in the *Phoenix* has good parallels in other vernacular poetic texts, such as the instances of the *hwilum* anaphora in *Beowulf* (e.g., ll. 2107–2109), the *Hwær cwom* and *Her bið ... læne* anaphora in *The Wanderer* (ll. 92–93 and 108–109 respectively), and, perhaps most notably, the negative anaphora also in *The Wanderer*:

Wita sceal gēþyldig:

ne sceal **no** to hatheort, **ne** to hrædwyrde,
ne to wac wiga, **ne** to wanhydig,
ne to forht, **ne** to fægen, **ne** to feohgifre,
ne næfre gielpes to georn, ær he geara cunne. (ll. 65–69)

‘A wise man shall be patient: he shall not be too hot-hearted, not too hasty of speech, nor too weak a warrior, not too reckless, nor too timorous nor too eager, nor too greedy for riches, nor ever too desirous of boasting, before he clearly may have knowledge.’³

It seems that idealised descriptions and negative anaphora go well together in Old English verse. Anaphora in general is considered among the most basic devices in traditional poetry, “particularly in the form where the repeated words or phrases begin lines.”⁴

Chapter 4 examines *Judgement Day II* against the background of its Anglo-Latin source, the *De die iudicii*, “variously attributed to Bede or Alcuin” (p. 71). Steen

³ Translation in Elaine Treharne (ed.), *Old and Middle English, c.890–c.1450: An Anthology*, 3rd edition, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; emphasis mine. Cf. also negative anaphora in *Beowulf* (ll. 2260–2265).

⁴ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia*, s.v. *anaphora*; cf. also ibid., s.v. *oral poetry*.

first provides a useful summary of the debate concerning the authorship of the Latin poem and then demonstrates what rhetorical devices are introduced into the Old English version by its translator. She comes to the conclusion that this translation is on the whole more slavish than *The Phoenix*, its author is determined “to be faithful to the source, even at the expense of the traditional vernacular devices of metre and alliteration” (p. 82) and as a result his style resembles homiletic prose rather than heroic poetry. Among the Latinate rhetorical devices that are introduced into *Judgement Day II* are polyptoton, epanalepsis, apostrophe, inexpressibility topos, and the Christian ‘thought, word, and deed’ triad.

The relation between the source and target texts is different in two Old English riddles analysed in chapter 5. Riddles 35 and 40 in the Exeter Book go back to two Anglo-Latin *Enigmata* by Aldhelm: numbers 33 (*Lorica*) and 100 (*Creatura*). These two texts were translated by two different authors separated from each other by time and geography. Moreover, even though riddles are an established genre in Old English poetry and, thus, should be easier to translate, the two poets seem to have produced their versions for two distinct audiences, which affected the degree of Latinisation of the target texts. While the poet of *Riddle 35* “made a great effort to adapt the poem to vernacular tradition” (p. 109), the poet of *Riddle 40*, placed by Steen in a learned, Latinate milieu – perhaps St. Augustine’s, Canterbury – indulged in classical figures and allusions, including his metonymic use of such names of pagan deities as *Zephyrus* and *Vulcan* for ‘swift wind’ and ‘fire’.

The final chapter is dedicated to Cynewulf’s poems: *Elene*, *Christ II*, and *Juliana*. As before, Steen compares the topoi and rhetorical devices of Cynewulf’s Latin sources to his extended Old English paraphrases. She shows that his “greatest poetic distinction is that ... his Latinity does not compromise his excellence as a vernacular *scop*. His art is that of fusing themes and stylistic devices from both cultures into an organic whole” (p. 137). Cynewulf not only borrows but appropriates anaphora, simile, homoeoteleuton, etc., uses them confidently, immerses them “into vernacular aural effects” and word-play, producing a virtuoso rhetoric of his own.

The overall conclusion of the book is that the use of Latinate rhetoric in Old English verse should be considered individually for each poet or poem and viewed against the background of direct and indirect sources both in continental and Anglo-Latin Christian poetry, homilies, and exegesis. For my part, this context is certainly there, it allows us to see connections between the two cultures, to interpret their allusions, to trace their quotations, to present our own arguments with virtuosity and rhetorical precision. I suspect, however, that we tend to make an equation between the learnedness of a scholar and the inspiration of a poet. What for us is a deliberate adaptation of an anaphora or apostrophe may be just an intuitive copying of a pattern for a Cynewulf or a Cædmon, who did not have to be thoroughly educated to be able to compare a turbulent life with sea-faring, just as they did not have to know that by doing so they employed a device called simile. But to return to the learned world, *Verse and Virtuosity* has certainly made an original, interesting and extremely useful contribution to the debate on Anglo-Saxon rhetoric.

